

Grimes Dyke Primary

Embedding outdoor learning in the curriculum – case study 2022



GRIMES DYKE
PRIMARY SCHOOL
ASPIRE ENJOY ACHIEVE

What was the need?

The Covid pandemic prompted staff to make greater use of our outdoor space. Like so many other schools, we recognised the lower risk factor in the transmission of Covid if learning in the fresh air but were not expecting the enormous positive impact on the children and staff because of this decision.

In September 2019, we started to review and change our school curriculum with the intent of ensuring that it met the specific needs of the children at Grimes Dyke. These are children who live in one of the most deprived areas of Leeds where the vast majority are entitled to free school meals. We know that our children have very limited life experiences and don't very often visit places outside of the estate where they live. Our children are victims of poverty, both financially and culturally so the curriculum had to be designed with this in mind.

As well as myself as Headteacher there are also a few other staff members who are passionate about nature and embedding the outdoors in the curriculum, but this sadly hadn't been a priority before the onset of the pandemic largely due to being in the Ofsted window! Leading a school in a global pandemic opened our eyes however to what was important and what was really needed; knowing that we'd recently had a successful Ofsted inspection also helped! We started by reminding ourselves that children didn't know the basics about nature; the names of flowers or trees or even the changes in the seasons because it wasn't a priority on the curriculum at that time. How were they supposed to learn this if we also know they don't leave the estate and explore the outdoors as many of our staff may have done? So many children spend so much time looking at screens both in school and at home so we thought 'why are we learning about the life cycle of a frog on a PowerPoint when we can see it for ourselves in real life?' We were guilty of feeding them a diet of screens and this had to change.

What did you do?

I recognised that learning outdoors would not be every teachers first choice, they lacked the skills, experience and passion that others on the staff had, **so we never said 'you have to'** to teachers. We gave teachers the freedom to take learning outdoors, permission to step away from desks and the classroom, and made them feel like it was okay. If we had stipulated that a certain percentage of lessons had to be taught outside the idea would have backfired!

There is a piece of research that says many children lose touch with nature at around the age of 13 and they don't come back to appreciating it until the age of 30. With this in mind we considered our younger staff to whom this might apply, and realised that many of them didn't have the subject knowledge or the love for the outdoors - we understood that staff would need support. We started with staff meetings and training days developing the confidence of the teachers. I spent quite a few weekends working alongside my partner to reclaim an allotment area at school and built eight raised beds which we planted up with children as part of an Easter holiday club, funded by Holidays Activity Funding.

Hyde Park Source a community garden charity delivered training in July and that really was our launch for staff. **Nature Friendly Schools** and the **Yorkshire Wildlife Trust** built our outdoor classroom and installed a superb fire pit, and we were ready to go. As a team we've experienced lighting fires, making bread on an open fire, aging trees and used what was on our doorstep as a positive learning environment. (The curriculum leader and the head teacher continue to support staff in lesson time – with an 'office' pair of wellies at the ready!)

We started delivering assemblies related to the outdoors and the children soon picked up that this was important in Grimes Dyke, we named our classes after British trees and bought books and field guides to support our outdoor learning.



The allotment continued to 'grow' and was linked it to our curriculum, sowing beans for Jack and the beanstalk, planting sunflower seeds and watching them grow to towering plants, observing changes and measuring their height in science, sewing potatoes and harvesting for the school canteen, growing raspberries and strawberries where the children know it is OK to pick and eat – we are working on developing understanding of seasonal planting and harvesting. The children still find it hard to understand why the strawberries don't grow all year round when they see them in Tesco's.

We are a **Nature Friendly School** funded by the DfE with a group of children targeted due to their mental health needs to attend the group weekly. Currently we have 20 children in the group and every Tuesday afternoon they meet with the head teacher to experience active learning and fun in the outdoors. The children are always busy planting, harvesting, laying paths, making seating areas, lighting campfires, cooking outdoors or learning about birds and wildlife. It doesn't matter what the weather is doing, we're always outside!

Most recently we've introduced a second Nature Friendly School's group with our 8 most challenging and vulnerable KS2 children in a group where parents and carers are invited to come along too. This has proved to be a fascinating insight into learning why these children behave the way they do. For example, many of the parents in the group are absolutely terrified of risk, dirt and cold which is then passed on to their children as anxiety. This is a pilot project for us now but is likely to continue and be offered to more children and their families. We are frequently asked by parents when it is their turn!

Our curriculum leader commented recently that **'if we don't use what we've got, then we don't deserve it!'** This is very true, and we remind ourselves of this all the time.

Funding

Nature Friendly Schools have been a great source of funding and practical learning support they've supported us with equipment, big builds and training. We also utilised the **holiday activity funding** from LCC, our holiday provision is very active and based in our wonderful school grounds. The children love it, and the clubs are always oversubscribed. I could probably run a club every day of the holiday and children would turn up. **Yorkshire housing** gifted us woodchip which allowed us to maintain paths and make access in our woods easier. We asked **parents** to donate wellies that their children had grown out of which was a huge success. We are gifted wellies on an ongoing basis and often from people completely unconnected with school.

We therefore actively seek funding and are not afraid to ask. We recently approached Rohan who have a 'Gift your Gear' scheme where people donate their old kit back to Rohan when it is still in good condition. As a result, we had 13 boxes of adult kit delivered to school for free! This means we have outdoor gear available for parents to join in and for some staff who may not have suitable clothing themselves.

We recognise that there will always be some ongoing costs but the benefits outweigh these and perhaps there will be a time in the future where we can charge schools and groups to access outdoor learning on our site. Currently we're happy to welcome people for free!

Practicalities

We want our children to be active all day everyday where the curriculum allows - not just on a PE day. We made the decision to change our uniform from traditional trousers, pinafores, skirts and dresses to joggers, leggings, hoodies and trainers. It wasn't easy as change is often feared, but as parents began to see and value the benefits of what we were doing they embraced the changes and now know to expect a little bit of mud! As a school we bought coats and waterproof trousers so the weather doesn't hold us back!



Parental engagement

Parents are happy with the opportunities and experiences that their children are getting. Our holiday clubs outdoors are oversubscribed and parents get involved with building dens with their children and climbing trees! Parents send us photos of things that they're doing at home, recognising that nature connects us and brings happiness - we get pictures of rainbows, Race for Life, walks in the park, watching meteor showers, star gazing, hugging a pine tree, building a bug hotel, spotting snowdrops... all sorts of marvellous experiences!

What impact has this had?

Taking learning outdoors has had a huge impact on the **wellbeing of children and staff**. Children want to be in school and want to learn in the outdoors. Attendance has improved as has the thirst for learning. They link learning to real life, the excitement of finding a newt and learning the life cycle of a frog, identifying bees and why they are important for our allotment, finding and observing insects and seeing the value of composting! Children are encouraged to take calculated risks in a safe environment, climb trees, pond dip, light fires and the joy that this brings is evident on their faces!

It's also had a **huge environmental impact**; children are very protective of the school grounds, litter picking, playing in wild growing grass. They can identify their class name trees and observe them in different seasons, they are familiar with the birds that visit our grounds and sometimes their song! Our children are active and learning and the more they learn the more they care for and respect the environment.

The lunchtime supervisors have noticed the difference in **behaviour** as children now play happily amongst the trees or climbing on tree stumps and often have a stick in their hand. We encourage staff to hold back from intervening in their imaginative play and only step in if there is a real risk of harm. Children play happily in the meadow in the summer a long way away from adults meaning they have to sort our conflicts and problems themselves. Recently some of our older children were carrying large sticks around the playground but the teaching assistant was happy to say she 'let them get on with it' as they were observed pretending to be Victorians the topic they are currently studying. In the past they would be told to put down sticks for immediate fear that someone would have an eye out!

The well being of staff has been an added bonus for us all. Staff can feel how relaxing it is to be outside with their classes and can describe how once they had developed the new skills and knowledge they were able to let go a little with their children. **Staff are 'braver' and give children more independence and opportunities to explore and take risks.**

As headteacher I get to spend quality time with the children teaching outdoors and have built strong relationships with children as a result. I get a break from the demands of the role and am giving children skills and knowledge I know they wouldn't get outside of school.

What's next?

This project will never be finished as there is always a new idea or opportunity to include, we strive to ensure the curriculum is fully integrated with the outdoors, sustainable for all staff to teach and reflects the 21st century world. It's got to be sustainable as we want to build a legacy for the future.

We're planning to extend our allotment and have 400 trees to be planted just beyond our wooded area. The children can already talk about the need to plant trees for their grandchildren to climb when they come to Grimes Dyke. We want to start a campfire club an allotment club in addition to our school curriculum offer and we hope to get parents and grandparents involved. We want to future proof it for generations of children to come!

We recognise that we are very fortunate and we're very prepared to share what we do with other children and schools – **if you'd like to see what we do or have a chat then please get in touch.**

